

BEYLE'S REPLY TO BALZAC

On receiving the *Revue Parisienne*, Beyle at once wrote to Balzac the letter a translation of which follows. This letter he seems to have entrusted to his friend Romain Colomb, afterwards his literary executor, in whose hands it still remained six months later. As published by Colomb, the letter includes the text actually addressed to Balzac and the draft here appended to it, and it so figures in *Stendhal: Œuvres Posthumes: Correspondance Inédite précédée d'une Introduction par Prosper Mérimée de l'Académie Française*: Vol. II, pp. 293-299 (Calmann-Lévy). The correct text was established by M. Paul Arbelet in the *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, Oct.-Dec., 1917, pp. 548 sqq. *La véritable lettre de Stendhal*, and reprinted by MM. G. Grès & Cie. in their edition of *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1922).

Civita-vecchia, 30th October, 1840.

Last night, Sir, I received a great surprise. No one, I think, has ever been so well treated in a Review, and by the best judge of the subject. You have taken pity on an orphan left wandering in the street. I have made a fitting response to this kindness, I read the review last night, and this morning I have cut down to four or five pages the fifty-four opening pages^[3] of the work which you have introduced to the world.

The confection of literature would have disgusted me with all pleasure in writing; I have dismissed all rejoicings over the printed page, to a time twenty or thirty years hence. Some literary rag-picker may make the discovery of the works whose merit you so strangely exaggerate.

Your illusion goes a long way, *Phèdre*, for instance. I may admit to you that I was shocked, I who am quite well-disposed towards the author.

Since you have taken the trouble to read this novel three times, I shall have a number of questions to ask you at our next meeting on the boulevard.

1. Am I allowed to call Fabrizio *our* hero? It was a question of not repeating the name Fabrizio too often.

2. Ought I to suppress the episode of *Fausta*, which has turned out unduly long? Fabrizio seizes the opportunity that is offered him to shew to the Duchessa that he is not susceptible to *love*.

3. The fifty-four opening pages seem to me a graceful introduction. I did indeed feel some misgivings when correcting the proofs, but I thought of those boring first half-volumes of Walter Scott, and of the endless preamble to the divine *Princesse de Clèves*.

I abhor an involved style, and I must admit to you that many pages of the *Chartreuse* were printed from my original dictation. As children say: I shall not return to it again. I think, however, that since the destruction of the court, in 1792, the part played by form becomes more exiguous daily. Were M. Villemain, whom I cite as the most distinguished of our Academicians, to translate the *Chartreuse* into French, he would require three volumes to express what I have given in two. The majority of scoundrels being emphatic and eloquent, people will take a dislike to the declamatory tone. At seventeen I came near to fighting a duel over the "indeterminate crest of the forests" of M. de Chateaubriand, who numbered many admirers in the 6th Dragoons. I have never read *La Chaumière indienne*, I cannot abide M. de Maistre.

My Homer is the *Memoirs* of Marshal Gouvion Saint-Cyr. Montesquieu and Fénelon's *Dialogues* strike me as well written. Except for Madame de Mortsau and her companions, I have read nothing of what has been printed in the last thirty years. I read Ariosto, whose stories I love. The Duchessa is copied from Correggio. I see the future history of French literature in the history of painting. We have reached the stage of the pupils of Pietro da Cortona, who worked rapidly and strained all his expressions, like Madame Cottin who makes the hewn stones of the Borromean Islands walk. After this novel, I have no . .

[4] While composing the *Chartreuse*, to acquire the tone, I used to read every morning two or three pages of the *Code Civil*.

Permit a coarse expression: I do not wish to b—— the heart of the reader. This, poor reader lets ambitious phrases pass, such as "the wind that uproots the waves," but they come back to him after the moment of emotion. I wish on the other hand that, if the reader thinks of Conte Mosca, he shall find nothing to cut down.

4. I am going to introduce, in the *foyer* of the Opera, Bassi and Riscara, sent to Paris as spies after Waterloo by Ranuccio-Ernesto IV. Fabrizio returning from Amiens will be struck by their Italian appearance and clipped Milanese, which these watchers imagine to be understood by no one. Everyone tells me that I must announce my characters. I shall greatly reduce the good Priore Blanès. I thought that the story needed characters who do nothing, and only touch the heart of the reader and dispel the air of romance.

You are going to think me a monster of pride. What, your inward sense will say, this creature, not content with what I have done for him, a thing without parallel in this century, still wishes to be praised for his style!

I see but one rule: *to be clear*. If I am not clear, all my world crumbles to nothing. I wish to speak of what is occurring in the heart of Mosca, of the Duchessa, of Clelia. It is a country into which hardly penetrates the gaze of the newly rich, such as the Latinist Master of the Mint, M. le Comte Roy, M. Laffitte, etc., etc., etc., the gaze of the grocer, the worthy paterfamilias, etc., etc.

If, to the obscurity of the matter, I add the obscurities of style of M. Villemain, of Madame Sand, etc. (supposing me to have the rare privilege of being able to write like those *choregi* of good style), if I add to the difficulty of the subject the obscurities of this vaunted style, no one in the world will understand the struggle between the Duchessa and Ernesto IV. The style of M. de Chateaubriand and M. de Villemain seems to me to say: 1. a number of pleasant little things, but things not worth saying (like the style of Ausonius, Claudian, etc.); 2. a number of little *insincerities*, pleasant to listen to. These great Academicians would have seen the

public go mad over their writings, had they been given to the world in 1780; their chance of greatness depended upon the old *régime*.

In proportion as the semi-intelligent become more numerous, the part played by form decreases. If the *Chartreuse* were translated into French by Madame Sand, she would make it a success, but, in order to express what there is in my two volumes, she would need three or four. Weigh this excuse.

The semi-intelligent puts above everything else the verse of Racine, for he can understand what is meant by an unfinished line; but every day his verse becomes a less important factor in Racine's merit. The public, as it grows more numerous, less sheeplike, requires a greater quantity of *little actual facts*, as to a passion, a situation in real life, etc. How often do we find Voltaire, Racine, etc., all of them in fact except Corneille, obliged to *cap* their lines for the sake of the rhyme; well, these capping lines occupy the place that should properly be filled by little actual facts.

In fifty years' time M. Bignan, and the Bignans who write in prose will have so wearied their public with productions that are elegant and devoid of any other merit, that the semi-intelligent will be in great difficulties; their vanity requiring them always to speak of literature and to make a pretence of thought, what will become of them when they can no longer attach themselves to form? They will end by making their god of Voltaire. Wit lasts no more than two centuries; in 1978, Voltaire will be Voiture; but *Le Père Goriot* will still be *Le Père Goriot*. Perhaps the semi-intelligent will be so distressed at no longer having their beloved rules to admire that it is highly possible that they will grow disgusted with literature and take to religion. All political rascals having a declamatory and eloquent tone, people will have grown sick of this in 1880. Then perhaps they will read the *Chartreuse*.

[The following passage occurs among the Beyle manuscripts at Grenoble, and was added to the printed text of the letter by Colomb. It appears rather to be alternative to some of the preceding paragraphs.]

The part played by *form* becomes more exiguous daily. Take Hume; imagine a History of France from 1780 to 1840, written with Hume's sound sense; it would be read, even if it were written in patois; it^[5] is written like the *Code Civil*. I am going to correct the style of the *Chartreuse*, since it hurts you, but I shall find it most difficult. I do not admire the style now in fashion, I have no patience with it. I see Claudians, Senecas, Ausoniuses. I have been told for the last year that one ought now and then to relax the reader's attention by describing scenery, dresses. These things have bored me so in other writers! I shall try.

As for immediate success, of which I should never have thought but for the *Revue Parisienne*, it is quite fifteen years since I said to myself: I should become a candidate for the Academy if I won the hand of Mademoiselle Bertin, who would have my praises sung three times weekly. When society is no longer tainted with common upstarts, valuing above everything else nobility, just because they are ignoble, it will no longer be on its knees before the press of the aristocracy. Before 1793 good company was the true judge of books, now it is haunted by the fear of another 1793, it is frightened, it is no longer a judge. Look at the catalogue which a little bookseller near Saint-Thomas-d'Aquin (Rue du Bac, about No. 110) supplies to the nobility, his neighbours. It is the argument that has most convinced me of the impossibility of pleasing these timid creatures, stupefied by idleness.

I have not in the least copied M. de Metternich, whom I have not seen since 1810, at Saint-Cloud, when he wore a bracelet of the hair of Caroline Murat, who was such a beauty then. I feel no regret for all that is destined not to happen. I am a fatalist, and hide from it. I imagine that I shall perhaps have a little success about 1860 or '80. Then there will be very little said of M. de Metternich, and even less of the petty Prince. Who was Prime Minister of England in the time of Malherbe? If I have not the misfortune to hit upon a Cromwell, I am sure of a nonentity.

Death makes us change places with these people. They can do anything with our bodies during their lives, but, at the moment of death, oblivion enwraps them for ever. Who will speak of M. de Villèle, of M. de Martignac, in a hundred years' time? M. de Talleyrand himself will be

preserved only by his *Memoirs*, if he has left good ones, while *Le Roman comique* is to-day what *Le Père Goriot* will be in 1980. It is Scarron who makes known the name of the Rothschild of his day, M. de Montauron, who was also, to the extent of fifty louis, the protector of Corneille.

You have well felt, Sir, with the tact of a man who has acted, that the *Chartreuse* could not deal with a great State, such as France, Spain, Vienna, on account of the administrative detail. I was left with the petty Princes of Germany and Italy.

But the Germans are so much on their knees before a riband, they are such fools! I spent several years among them, and have forgotten their language, out of contempt for them. You can easily see that my characters could not be Germans. If you follow this idea, you will find that I have been led by the hand to an extinct dynasty, to a Farnese, the least obscure of these *extinct* personages, on account of the Generals, his grandsires.

I take a character well-known to myself, I leave him the habits he has contracted in the art of going out every morning in pursuit of pleasure, then I give him more intelligence. I have never seen Signora di Belgiojoso. Rassi was a German; I have talked to him hundreds of times. I picked up the Prince while staying at Saint-Cloud in 1810 and 1811.

Ouf! I hope that you will have read this treatise three times. You say, Sir, that you do not know English: you have in Paris the *bourgeois* style of Walter Scott in the heavy prose of M. Delécluze, editor of the *Débats*, and author of a *Mademoiselle de Liron* which has something in it. Walter Scott's prose is inelegant and above all pretentious. One sees a dwarf who is determined not to lose an inch of his stature.

This astounding article, such as no writer has ever received from another, I have read, I now make bold to confess to you, with shouts of laughter, whenever I came to an encomium that was at all strong, and I met them at every turn. I could see the expression on the faces of my friends as they read it.

For instance the Minister d'Argout, being then Auditor to the Council of State, was my equal and, moreover, what is known as a friend; 1830 comes, he is a Minister, his clerks, whom I do not know, think that there are at least thirty artists. . . .

[3]*i.e.*, Chapters I and II.

C. K. S. M.

[4]This sentence is left unfinished at the foot of a page, the next page beginning with "While composing," etc.

[5]This seems to refer to the *Chartreuse*.

C. K. S. M.